

Articulating the entrepreneurship career: a study of German women entrepreneurs

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Abstract

Based on interviews and focus group discussions with 17 women entrepreneurs from Germany this paper examines how the women construct accounts of entrepreneurship as a gendered career. While becoming an entrepreneur for these women was deemed preferable to having no career, the interpretative repertoires emerging around entrepreneurship as a career mainly referred to structural barriers, such as the 'anti-child anti-woman' attitude within German society or their acceptance of the 'male game' due to gendered role expectations embedded within social institutions. Interpreted from a career perspective, the findings indicate that entrepreneurial careers do not live up to the women's expectations as they are subject to the same gendered constraints as those faced in waged employment. The paper contributes to boundaryless career theory by illustrating how even within a country of high employment rates and talent shortage, Germany's status as a conservative welfare state builds gender inequality into entrepreneurial women's lives to constrain career choices.

Keywords

Gender, motherhood, entrepreneurship, boundaryless career, Germany

Introduction

The attractiveness of entrepreneurship as a career continues to strengthen globally (Lewis et al., 2015) and the increasing number of women starting new ventures (Kelley et al., 2013) has generated an expanding amount of articles analysing the impact of gender on entrepreneurship (Marlow et al., 2009; Patterson and Mavin, 2009; Marlow and McAdam,

2014; Henry et al., 2015; Welter et al., 2014; Stead, 2015; Tlaiss, 2015), with some of those studies (Patterson and Mavin, 2009; Tlaiss 2015) exploring the motivational aspects of becoming an entrepreneur. Analysing entrepreneurship from a career perspective implies that entrepreneurial activity is a career move just like the choice of any other profession (Hytti, 2010). Understood from this perspective, entrepreneurial careers are multi-dimensional (Gati et al., 2010), and as such cannot be theorized without consideration of the personal characteristics (DeMartino et al., 2006) and social ascriptions of the individuals involved. While the construct of the boundaryless career (Sullivan, 1999) has been situated in the context of entrepreneurship (Hytti, 2010), examinations of individual women's accounts - particularly outside the Anglophone context - of the experience of crossing the boundary between employment and entrepreneurship are fewer (Baughn et al 2006).

Recognising the socio-economic context from which understandings of 'new' careers - including careers as boundaryless - has emerged, an affinity between entrepreneurship as a form of economic activity that privileges individual agency and boundaryless careers can be discerned. Nevertheless, the boundaryless career concept remains conceptually contentious, and has attracted criticism. Inkson, (2006) and Inkson et al (2010) for example describe it as overly simplistic as it trivializes boundaries which are often important means of defining and understanding careers. The notion of the boundaryless career is based on the assumption that individuals have the opportunity to exercise greater agency over their career choices (Arthur 1994; Inkson 2006; Sullivan 2006; Sullivan and Baruch 2009). This shift has been ascribed to the rise of political and economic policies of neoliberalism (Brown and Tannock, 2009); the growth of new organizational forms (Bakker, 2010; Cacciotti and Hayton, 2015), and technological and social changes impacting upon the nature of work and careers (Inkson, 2006).

It also, as we illustrate below, does not recognise the significance of the broader socio-economic context and legal specificities of the nations within which individual careers are located. Nevertheless, it does offer scope for insight into the multi-dimensionality of the

modern career, and the critical role of agency in career analysis (Lewis et al. 2015). Contrary to the notion that entrepreneurship offers meritocratic equal career opportunities with an absence of formal entry requirements (Mole and Roper, 2012), it has been demonstrated that there is a persistent gender bias within the entrepreneurial discourse (Henry et al., 2015). Although attempts have been made to 'de-link' (Williams and Nadin, 2013, p. 552) entrepreneurship from capitalism to draw attention to entrepreneurship outside the for-profit sector, other authors note (Marlow and Swail, 2014) that entrepreneurship remains largely perceived as a career space where individuals can realize their career aspirations given the centrality of individual agency underpinning new career models within neo-liberal market economies. Within this context, entrepreneurship is, Ahl and Marlow observe (2012), recognized as the "foundation of opportunistic individualism" (p. 544) where personal effort alone is sufficient to determine reward and status. The decontextualization of entrepreneurship as career thus fails to recognize institutional constraints and contextual norms that limit the scope of those who can enter the field as a credible agent (Ahl, 2006; Ahl et al., 2010; Nicholson and Anderson, 2005; Watson, 2013;). As Mole and Mole (2010) highlight, the nexus of entrepreneur and opportunity is one that requires understanding within the context of social systems and individual agency. In broad terms this relates to a debate that addresses the ability of the actors/entrepreneurs to shape their destiny against the extent to which fate is determined by external forces (Sarason et al., 2006).

The aim of this study is to explore how 17 women entrepreneurs in Germany articulate their experience of the shift to entrepreneurship following more mainstream corporate careers. Situated within the boundaryless career literature to interpret the articulation of this shift, the paper extends contributions to insights into the social, political and economic nature of entrepreneurial careers by drawing attention to how, in the conservative welfare state context of Germany (Esping-Anderson, 1990; Fleckenstein and Seeleib-Kaiser, 2011), women entrepreneurs experience gendered barriers to entrepreneurship. This experience is

influenced by a gendered division of labour rooted in a framework that promotes the maintenance of women's role as the principal care-givers in the family (Béland, 2009).

To develop our understanding of the experiences articulated by the women entrepreneurs we studied, the paper is framed by a social constructionist feminist lens to analyse perceptions of entrepreneurship as a gendered activity. Social constructionist feminist researchers within the entrepreneurship field see gender as a socially constructed phenomenon (Ahl, 2004, 2006; Marlow et al, 2009; Patterson and Mavin, 2009; Stead, 2015), rooted in everyday action (West and Zimmerman, 1987). Framing our study in this way therefore alerts us to the gendered construction and assumptions underpinning the individual narratives expressed by the women in this study and that shape our understanding of entrepreneurship more broadly, and how the broader context of the relationship between the individual and the social influences the 'doing' of gender (West and Zimmerman, 1987; Ahl, 2006; Broadbridge and Simpson 2011). When gender is in focus, the study object goes beyond men and women; for example, professions are gendered, and so is entrepreneurship, as we demonstrate later. In our research questions: (1) What interpretation do women provide about entrepreneurship as a career in relation to previous careers? (2) How do women construct accounts of entrepreneurship as gendered?, we address how gender is constructed in entrepreneurship within a discourse of women entrepreneurs, and stress the importance of drawing attention to the specificities of the broader context within which gendered experiences take place.

We use gender as a common denominator for linking two research streams, career literature and entrepreneurship literature, situating our study within the context of calls for more interdisciplinary approaches to the field of entrepreneurship research (Ahl and Marlow, 2012). We adopt an inductive, discourse analytical approach by conducting in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with 17 women entrepreneurs in Germany and respond to calls towards more focused qualitative methodologies (Henry et al., 2015).

Entrepreneurship as Career

Gender and the “new” career

Careers are regarded as the “evolving sequence of a person’s work experiences over time” (Arthur et al., 1989, p. 8) and are traditionally linked to positions situated within the social space of an organization (Dyer, 1976; Feldman, 1988). Since the mid-1980s the rise, most notably in Anglophone countries, of political and economic policies of neoliberalism (Brown and Tannock, 2009), alongside technological developments and new organizational forms (Kerr, Robinson, and Elliott, 2016; Bakker 2010; Cacciotti and Hayton 2015) have led to the reconceptualization of careers as ‘boundaryless’ (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996), ‘protean’ (Hall, 1996), ‘spiral’ (Brousseau et al., 1996) and ‘post-corporate’ (Peiperl and Baruch, 1997). These new career metaphors signal a shift in agency; where once organizations dominated the structure and path of individual’s careers (McKinlay 2002; Wilensky 1960), now organizations present as less able to provide job stability or career development opportunities (Rodriguez and Guest 2010).

Career transitions are now regarded as influential events in people’s working lives (Chudzikowski, 2011), particularly within ‘boundaryless’ career literature (Arthur and Rousseau, 2001). The allure of the boundaryless career concept for women lies in the fact that it is ostensibly flexible enough to accommodate career options and it facilitates physical or psychological independence from traditional career arrangements (Tams and Arthur, 2010; Sullivan and Arthur, 2006).

However, as LaPointe (2013) remarks, while evidence points to persistent gender differences in career patterns due to traditional gender roles this should not be interpreted as a matter of choice. Women with children have consistently reported barriers to their advancement due to stereotypes and gendered perceptions of mothers in the workplace and the inability of traditional structures to accommodate their career needs (Miner et al., 2014; Perlow and Kelly, 2014). Although gendered perceptions are not the single driver for career

choices, they play significant roles in career processes and outcomes of individuals (Bourne and Mustafa, 2008). Despite women's growing participation in the workforce, their careers are decidedly different from those of men as a result of their life context (Cabrera, 2007; Ibarra et al., 2010; Blair-Loy, 2009; Emslie and Hunt, 2009) and are more infrequently linear in nature than those of their male counterparts. Compared with men's careers, those of women display more periods out of the labour force and greater variation on a number of dimensions (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2006; Grant-Vallone and Ensher, 2010) notably organizational and cultural constraints such as long hours and norms of total commitment, which limit women's options and are asynchronous with the family lifecycle (Stone, 2007; Jones, 2012). Women may have less freedom than men to engage in physical mobility (Sullivan and Arthur, 2006) as the factors influencing women's career development and thus the decision to leave an organization are often embedded in caring or family responsibilities in addition to their working schedule. This is supported by Vinkenburg and Weber (2012), who call for studying women's career patterns beyond work by including family and other life domains as women's careers change relative to the ways they reconcile their roles and relationships. This demonstrates that successful career development of women depends highly on the context in which it takes place (Knörr, 2011).

Entrepreneurship as a gendered career

Entrepreneurship has been frequently described as an alternative career model for women (Cabrera, 2007; O'Neil et al., 2008; Ashe et al., 2011). Yet, there is some agreement that the impetus to self-employment has less to do with personal choice and more as a response to circumstances (Mallon and Cohen, 2001; Knörr, 2011). As Lewis et al. (2015) suggest, self-employment is seen as a dual pathway for women to attain meaningful engagement with economic empowerment alongside the maintenance of familial obligations. The decision to be an entrepreneur they argue is represented as a positive one for women: an empowering choice that provides an alternative to careers within male dominated corporations and offers greater flexibility, a space for creativity and self-fulfilment.

The ostensible career flexibility accrued to women when becoming an entrepreneur has been challenged by research on female entrepreneurs which indicates that there is a persistent but occluded gender bias within the entrepreneurial discourse (Marlow and Patton, 2005b). Such gender bias is significant not just in terms of social injustice; women are positioned as deficient unless they subscribe to a masculine discourse (Ahl and Marlow, 2012). The feminist critique has for some time attacked the tendency of researchers who study women by using men as their standards of comparison, as the production of knowledge is based on gendered ideas and reproduces a system of gendered relations Ahl, 2004; Bruni et al., 2005). The ensuing stereotypical beliefs about entrepreneurs then effect women's entry into, and development as, entrepreneurs (Marlow and Patton, 2005a; Díaz-García and Jiménez-Moreno, 2010).

Recently research has moved forward from recognizing gender as a variable, which compared and described differences, to work that recognizes gender as a social construct subordinating the feminine and thus creating gender challenges for female business owners (Henry and Marlow, 2014). Feminists are agreed that female subordination is a feature of most known societies (Oakley, 1974 cited in Marlow, 2002). This was mainly explained by the existence of sex-gender systems and the ascription of a set of characteristics that differentiate males from females, where characteristics associated with the feminine are regarded subordinate to those of the masculine and these differences will mostly be articulated as female deficiency (Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Elliott and Stead, 2008).

Ultimately sex-gender systems shape our perception of appropriate behaviours for men and women in all spheres including that of work. Considering the impact of vertical and horizontal occupational segregation, today women are still placed in jobs with little control or power (Ridgeway, 2011; Maniam et al., 2010). Influenced by their labour market history and the associations between femininity and lower value work (Bradley, 2007), women are more likely to set up small firms in similar areas which become translated into low margin entrepreneurship (Marlow et al., 2009). Low pay constrains the opportunities to amass the

financial capital necessary to apply for funding, which in turn restricts the entrepreneur to areas that do not require substantial investment. Thus, women predominantly run part time, home based firms which generally have fewer capital requirements of the sort that can be easily gained from informal sources of funding (Marlow and Swail, 2014). Ultimately their businesses tend to remain small in terms of employment, sales, profitability, and market share (Carter and Marlow, 2007). Issues such as sectoral concentration, lack of credibility and access to finance are directly related to their subordination within the prevailing gender systems and reinforced by their positioning in waged and domestic labour (Marlow, 2002).

That women are defined in terms of their relationship to the home and family has been widely recognized, an association that impacts negatively on female entrepreneurs (Ridgeway and Correll, 2004; Tinklin et al., 2005; Budig and England, 2001; Stainback et al., 2011). Women often engage with self-employment as a coping strategy to accommodate child care and a career (McGowan et al., 2012b), leading to the operating profiles of women-owned firms reflecting feminised working patterns. This results in about half of self-employed women working part time (less than 30 hours per week) and approximately a third base their business within the home (Bosma and Harding, 2006). Such firms are perceived as an extension of the domestic sphere, which in turn impacts the legitimacy accorded by creditors, customers and even family members. Again the perception of women as mothers, carers and domestic workers is intrinsic to their subordination, in which the home is a devalued site of work compared to any other site of economic output (Marlow, 2002) and since a fundamental characteristic of business activity is its separation from home, the credibility of female entrepreneurship is undermined by its association with and reflection of gendered norms in the socio-economic context (Marlow et al., 2013).

Sex differences in entrepreneurial intentions and activities therefore do not arise from essential biological differences but reflect socially constructed gendered disincentives. This bias was highlighted by Ahl (2004; 2007), who showed that in academic work there was an equivalence between characteristics ascribed to the entrepreneur and those ascribed to

manhood. Thus, normative constructions of femininity (Greene et al., 2013) are not congruent with prevailing entrepreneurial stereotypes and serve to separate women from the normative male entrepreneur (Marlow et al., 2009). The gendered nature of entrepreneurship is therefore deeply embedded within a discourse of masculinity (Ahl, 2006; Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Stead, 2015) derived from the normative male model of work upon which waged employment is based.

The Broader Context – Germany as conservative-welfare state

Studies on entrepreneurship mainly originate from the United States and the United Kingdom (Ahl, 2004). Despite extensive attempts to increase women's participation in entrepreneurship in Germany, there are nevertheless few studies that examine women's experiences of establishing themselves as entrepreneurs in Germany, where a gender gap continues to exist. This is despite Germany's rising employment rates (Festing, Kornau and Schäfer, (2015), declining population and birth rates (Destatis, 2013), and corresponding 'talent' shortage (Festing et al, 2015; Destatis, 2011). Attempts made to increase the number of women in senior roles by the German government and the corporate sector during the last decade has led to minor changes (Festing et al, 2015). Women hold just 3% of positions on management boards and 11.9% on the supervisory boards of the 200 top companies (Holst, Busch and Kröger, 2012). In the UK by comparison, women hold 8% of executive directorships and 28.5% of non-executive directorships on FTSE100 companies (Vinnicombe, Doldor, Sealy, Price and Turner, 2015).

This dominance of studies from the US and UK means that our understandings of how women experience entrepreneurship in different contexts is limited and confined to liberal welfare (Esping-Anderson, 1990; Fleckenstein and Seeleib-Kaiser, 2011) states, where the welfare system is based upon the relationship between the individual and the state. As a conservative welfare state by contrast, German social policies have traditionally been geared towards facilitating the family model of the male breadwinner and female homemaker with

the Christian Democratic Party as the main political force driving this development (Fleckenstein, 2011), which has implications for gender equality (Fleckenstein and Seeleib-Kaiser, 2011). Hence, the conservative welfare state model in Germany is mainly concerned with the preservation of status differentials (Drobnič and Rodríguez, 2011).

The norm of the male breadwinner and female homemaker family is closely coupled with standard work arrangements which have discouraged the employment of women, especially the mothers of young children (Fleckenstein, 2011). The gendered division of labour remains rooted in a culture of obligation that provides a framework for the maintenance of women's role as the principal care-givers in the family and underlines the ideological character of the welfare state (Béland, 2009). A recent policy development shows an expansion of employment-centred family policies informed by the adult worker model, in which it is assumed that men and women are in the labour market. The expansion of childcare for the under-threes and the introduction of the earnings-related parental leave benefit breaks with the traditional breadwinner ideology (Fleckenstein, 2011). Despite remarkable changes and family policies being in transition, various inconsistencies need to be acknowledged in this departure from the male breadwinner model. For example, the system of marriage based joint taxation has not been subject to reform, similarly the introduction of a care allowance in 2013, encouraging women to stay at home for longer periods for child-care purposes, indicates some persistence of the old paradigm and the maintenance of Germany as a conservative welfare state (Geisler and Kreyenfeld, 2012). A consequence of the latest child care reforms introduced in 2013 is that by law children under the age of three are entitled to a subsidised Kindergarten place. However, places in day care centres are still a scarce resource in Germany and the shortage of supply confines women's labour market activity. As Lewis et al. (2008) argue, the issue of care for children is not only critical for the understanding of public and private responsibilities but also key to the understanding of the role of men and women in both families and society. In the media for example, Achtenhagen and Welter's (2011) analysis of the representation of women's entrepreneurship in German

newspapers found that newspapers reinforce a picture of entrepreneurship that is old-fashioned and builds on traditional gender stereotypes, which in turn they argue restricts the propensity for women to seriously consider this career option. Given the conservative nature of the country, the study of female entrepreneurship in Germany sheds important light on how gender is constructed generally and how it constrains women's entrepreneurial careers particularly.

Research approach

We address our research questions by first taking a discourse analytical approach stemming from discursive psychology, and in so doing, adopt an epistemological position that acknowledges language's role in the construction of gender. This approach allows for detailed examination and identification of individual women's interpretative repertoires in accounts of their career experiences. Interpretative repertoires are "a lexicon or register of terms and metaphors drawn upon to characterize and evaluate actions and events" Potter and Wetherell (1987, p. 138). Proponents of a feminist critical discursive psychology are informed by a mix of post-structuralism, theories of social position, social constructivism and linguistic philosophy (Edley and Wetherell, 2001; Weatherall 2006; Wetherell, 1998, and Wetherell and Edley, 1998) and place "gender ideologies at the forefront of the analysis" (Bucholtz, 2005:, p. 57).

Discursive psychology takes language as its topic, examining the ways in which people construct attitudes, experiences and emotions (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Discursive psychologists have demonstrated that the way these accounts are produced is highly context specific and that one can accomplish a wide variety of social actions via different forms of talk. Critical discursive psychology aims to capture the relationship between discourse and the speaking subject and recognizes that culture may supply various ways of talking about or constructing an object and that speakers are bound to choices (Edley, 2001). A discursive psychologist would insist that gender is something that is done or

accomplished in the course of social interaction. To make sense of the broader context in which the repertoires are 'done' (West and Zimmerman, 1987), we locate our discussion of them within a social constructionist frame. This framing recognises that entrepreneurship is constructed by individuals' social experiences, and it is the participants' accounts we wish to understand (Bryman, 2001).

The transcripts were analysed according to two analytical questions: (1) What interpretation do women provide about entrepreneurship as a career in relation to their previous careers?; (2) How do women construct accounts of entrepreneurship as a gendered career? Gilbert and Mulkay (1984) argue that analysts should no longer seek to force diverse discourses into one authoritative account of their own; instead of assuming that there is only one truly accurate version of action and belief, they need to become more sensitive to the interpretative variability among participants and seek to understand why so many different versions of events can be produced. They call these different versions interpretative repertoires. In discourse analytical terms, they are defined as coherent ways of talking about events and as the building blocks of conversation (Edley, 2001).

Research sample

The sampling approach taken for this study can be described as purposive, with the purpose of identifying those people who have information about the process (Babbie, 2012). When a non-probability sampling technique is used, choice is based on the researcher's judgment regarding the population's characteristics that are important to collect the relevant information (Symon and Cassell, 2012). The interviewees for this study consist of 17 female entrepreneurs, located in Germany, who moved from corporate management positions to entrepreneurship. Criteria for selection included women based in Germany who held a corporate management position prior to moving into entrepreneurship and who are active entrepreneurs for a minimum of two years. A corporate management position for the purpose of this study includes responsibility for controlling or administering an organization

or group of staff in the corporate environment. Ideally, this career move would have taken place within the last seven years (after the enforcement of the equality law in 2006). To construct our sample we contacted several organizations that support female entrepreneurs in setting up their businesses. We screened their webpages and found member portraits outlining the entrepreneurs' previous experience as well as the date of business foundation. We approached the selected participants in a personal e-mail. In total we contacted about 20 women and recruited 11 out of the 17 interview partners from the web-based portraits. We selected four further participants out of our own network, with one of them suggesting two more women that met the selection criteria, for interviews. The table below summarizes the combined sampling approach.

Insert Figure 1 here

Seventeen women participated in the study, all of whom lived and operated their business in Germany. Participants ranged in age from 32 to 61, and at the time of the interviews 10 of the women had some degree of child care responsibility, with nine of them being mothers at the point of their move to entrepreneurship. Their last corporate management positions were based on different levels of the organizational hierarchies, reaching from executive jobs (CEO, deputy CEO) to the middle and lower management levels. They pursued their last corporate career step in various industries including construction, automotive and public relations. The majority of women set up businesses in the service sector, such as consulting and other business services and most had chosen to start their businesses in a field in which they had no prior experience.

Insert Table 1 here

Data collection

In-depth semi-structured interviews have become extremely prominent methods of data gathering within a feminist research framework, with the in-depth face-to-face interview becoming "the" feminist method (Kelly et al., 1994, p. 34). Feminist interviewers are

“interested in getting at the subjugated knowledge of the diversity of women’s realities that often lie hidden and unarticulated” (Hesse-Bieber, 2007, p. 113). The interview protocol consisted of eight open ended questions and was used as a guideline for steering the conversations. The interview duration was between 40 minutes and 3 hours. The interview was structured into two thematic areas: 1) the experience of the move to entrepreneurship, and 2) their experience as entrepreneurs. Based on the interview findings we realized that some topics received less attention than others as women did not feel comfortable discussing them during the interviews. We therefore conducted two focus group discussions by telephone to prompt in-depth views on certain topics that emerged during the interviews. These were conducted by telephone due to the geographical distribution of the interviewees and because they offered the advantage of relative anonymity between participants thereby potentially increasing participants’ contributions to the discussion (Krueger, 2009; Smith et al., 2009). In addition, telephone discussions can be held outside of business hours, offering a scheduling advantage.

Hennink (2014) argues that the most unique characteristic of focus group research occurs in the interactive discussions, which generate different types of data not accessible through interviews. As the focus group discussions are building on the outcome of the individual in-depth interviews and to assess the robustness of the initial interview analysis, the same group of people was invited to the discussions. From the 17 interviewees, 8 agreed to participate. Based on their availability, the participants were arranged into 2 groups of 5 and 3 women, respectively (Group 1: AA, EE, LL, MM, QQ, Group 2: JJ, NN, RR). All in-depth interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Data analysis

Social constructionist feminist arguments critically analyse the gendered construction and assumptions underpinning discourses that shape the understanding of entrepreneurial activities (Ahl, 2006). Feminism involves perceptions about women’s unique needs, their

subordination as well as differences of power within social interactions (Gattiker and Larwood, 1986; Nabi, 2001). It also embraces the power relations that create gender subordination as well as the social and economic roles of women, which are defined in relation to male norms (Weedon, 1996; Frye, 1996). This study focuses on understanding how German women entrepreneurs articulate their career transition experiences and how they experience entrepreneurship. Data analysis was informed by the literature on gender and entrepreneurship and went through two stages: a) to identify interpretative repertoires relevant to the research question and b) to discuss the meanings they imply. The purpose of this approach to data analysis was to identify the social construction of meaning that occurred through an interactive dialogue rather than focusing on individual contributions (Silverman, 2011). This approach provides a good opportunity to observe how participants present their opinion or how the dialogue shapes perspectives (Hennink, 2014). We started the data analysis process with coding of data. As Saldaña (2012) points out, in qualitative data analysis a code is a researcher generated construct that attaches interpreted meaning to data for later purposes of pattern detection and categorization.

Insert Figure 1 here

The first phase of the coding covers the precoding, this means repeatedly reading each transcript and identifying themes. In accordance with Miles and Huberman's (1994) approach, we pre-coded words and short phrases by highlighting participants' quotes or passages worthy of attention after the interview data were collected (i.e., during the transcription phase). The precoding of data was done in MS Word. We then uploaded the 17 transcripts into Nvivo 10, a software package designed to distil and support the analysis of qualitative data. A question that focuses on the exploration of participants' perceptions of a phenomenon of interest may be best answered by combining First and Second Cycle coding methods (Saldaña, 2012). The coding methods selected for the purpose of this study include a combination of In Vivo and Initial Coding (First Cycle coding) and pattern coding (Second Cycle coding). Initial Coding was used as starting point to provide us with analytic leads and

directions (Glaser, 1978). In our case it provided us with a broad view on the topics that emerged. In Vivo was then used as the codes refer to a word or short phrase from the actual language and terms used by the participants themselves. In Vivo codes can provide a crucial check on whether all the significant aspects have been grasped and may help crystallize and condense meanings (Charmaz, 2006). After completion of First Cycle coding, we directly moved to Second Cycle coding with the objective to identify interpretative repertoires. Based on the First Cycle codes, the primary goal during Second Cycle coding is to develop smaller and more select categories, themes or concepts. The following table summarizes the identified main categories from the interviews (first cycle codes) and the interpretative repertoires (second cycle codes). Besides sample quotes, it provides definitions of the interpretative repertoires as criteria for inclusion or exclusion of quotes. The focus of analysis in this paper is on two interpretative repertoires emerging from the main category 'Barriers against Female Entrepreneurs': the 'anti-child, anti-woman' and the 'acceptance of female entrepreneurs' repertoires.

Insert Table 2 here

It seems beyond controversy that the classical concepts of validity, reliability and objectivity used in quantitative research cannot be applied in discourse analysis (Wodak and Meyer, 2009). Alasuutari (1995) refers to the specimen perspective, where interview answers are analysed as linguistic expressions rather than facts about how users think or behave. Thus, participants' expressions are analysed not only for their content and meaning but also for the implications and effects in constructing different versions of reality. The reliability of research does not depend on the trustworthiness of participants' answers because even a speaker who lies employs cultural forms and interpretative resources that are neither true nor false, but simply exist (Silverman, 2011).

According to Alasuutari (1995), the reliability of findings depends on the verifiability of the researchers' interpretations, which are based on the collected data. A text, as the object of research, is the basis for the argumentation and provides the linguistic evidence for the

researcher's interpretation (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). In accordance with Silverman's (2011) suggestions we make the research process transparent by describing the research strategy and data analysis methods in a detailed manner and by paying attention to the theoretical stance from which the interpretation takes place and showing how this produces particular interpretations and excludes others. Further, as this study was conducted in German, the translation of the interview and focus group guides, as well as the interview transcripts, was of central importance. In order to overcome these limitations, scholars (e.g. Douglas and Craig, 2007; Epstein et al., 2013) have suggested a team-based approach to translation, as a team can bring together the mix of required skills (e.g., linguistic skills) and the disciplinary expertise required. It therefore does not require a mechanical process to convey identical meanings; instead, they propose a shift toward a more "contextualized approach based on reframing translations as a form of intercultural interaction rather than lexical transfer of meaning" (Chidlow et al., 2014, p. 573).

Barriers against female entrepreneurs in Germany

The interpretative repertoires identified in the interview and focus group materials emerged from the second stage of the analytical process and allowed us to identify how interviewees articulated and explained their experience as entrepreneurs. The two repertoires we focus on in this section: 'anti-child anti-woman' and 'acceptance of female entrepreneurs' are located under the main category: 'barriers against female entrepreneurs'.

Repertoire: Anti-Child, Anti-Woman

The 'anti-child, anti-woman' repertoire predominantly refers to barriers resulting from the sociocultural status of women (Bruni et al., 2004b), which identifies women's primary role as taking care of family and domestic responsibilities. Jennings and Brush (2013) see a fundamental contribution of women's entrepreneurship research in the notion that entrepreneurial activity is embedded in a family system. The central contributions were that decisions and processes are not only influenced by, but also have an impact upon, family-

level factors. In common with previous studies (Brush,1992; Duberley and Carrigan, 2012), the women entrepreneurs in this study did not view their businesses as separate economic entities but rather as endeavours entwined with their familial relationships and responsibilities.

Members of the second focus group discussed adherence to traditional gender roles with respect to childcare. For example, RR showed that a large part of her entrepreneurial activity was conditioned by the necessity to maintain a dual presence at home and at work. Her responsibility for the family forced her to set limits on her life in the company, which was frequently subject to time constraints with respect to travelling. A common theme that emerged from the first focus group was that motherhood led to the detriment of women's entrepreneurial careers. Despite this, some interviewees embarked upon entrepreneurship in order to deal with the challenges that childcare entailed. Motherhood and running a business from the sphere of home created legitimacy concerns for most of them which partly even resulted in losing orders. The women articulated conflicts when trying to balance work and family (Drew and Humbert, 2012). Maternity seemed to be one of the most sensitive issues faced by the interviewees. The interviews revealed that the women were partly fighting against a lack of credibility with respect to doing business, which ultimately resulted in hiding their pregnancies or lives as mothers (Ekinsmyth, 2011). AA and EE described how they lost credibility and, ultimately, clients when they mentioned they were mothers. If a child needed special and unforeseen care, EE would even go as far as lying in order to demonstrate that she could achieve the necessary separation between home and work. EE perceived her transition to motherhood as fraught with difficulties. Her primary responsibility was childcare, and she tailored her working arrangements accordingly. In order to juggle the various needs, she blurred the confines between the domains of work and home so that she could move smoothly between them. In order to alternate physically between them, she set up an office in her apartment. As Marlow (2002) points out, the perception of women as mothers and carers is intrinsic to their subordination, in which the home is a devalued site of

labour compared to any other site suitable for economic output. When their office is located within the devalued sphere of the home, women are usually disadvantaged and ultimately perceived as lacking credibility (Marlow, 2002).

During the focus group discussion, QQ stressed that she did not experience any overt discrimination. However, she was still aware that being female and a mother singled her out from her peers. As a businesswoman, she had a hard time renegotiating her standing within her environment. She related pregnancy to being brand marked.

"When I got pregnant, it felt like having a pimple somewhere on my cheek...I was avoided by male colleagues...and it took a long time for me to professionally get back to the status I was enjoying prior to pregnancy...It feels like when you are pregnant and have children, you are visibly branded." (QQ: 4.03 1 Ref 2)

Career wise most of the interviewees saw the transition to parenthood as full of difficulties and challenges. EE recognized that having children significantly set her back in terms of her career. Since giving birth she felt discouraged in fulfilling her potential. A broadcasting designer, she mentioned giving up creativity and indirectly referred to a significant change in working habits that motherhood brought along. For her, maternity was a source of uncertainty for the business.

"As soon as you have children, you cannot work night and day anymore...You virtually give up your creativity in the delivery room." (EE: 4.03 1 Ref 1)

Business uncertainty as a result of pregnancy or motherhood was partly reinforced by certain clients' behaviours. MM referred to a lack of credibility as a businesswoman resulting from motherhood. In her industry, having children was perceived as constraining on business.

One of the interviewees reflected on the situation of working mothers in Germany as follows:

"In Germany the attitude in general is anti-child; this means anti-woman, and you can link this together." (AA: 1.01 Ref 6)

It was the boundaries created by childcare demands within masculinized corporate environments that led some of the women to find an alternative in entrepreneurship. As women, it was they who took on the responsibility of trying to balance the demands of home and family. LL, like most of the focus group participants, related the difficulties of managing multiple roles. Being simultaneously a mother, wife and an entrepreneur created a number of challenges. Many of the women had to find strategies to fit in with the prevailing culture and overcome the so-called "otherness" of being a mother and/or a wife. This included the strain, related by LL, placed on working mothers by the limited opening hours of clinics and grocery stores, which in Germany are based on the female-homemaker, male breadwinner norms of German society,

"This needs to be discussed much more openly....the skills and capabilities of women and how they manage multiple roles...My son is around the age of Ms. Braches...However, previously I had to manage the business, deal with doctors that close doors at 5:00 pm, shopping until 6:00 pm and customers pushing for delivery....." (LL: 4.08 1 Ref 1).

Despite changes in gender roles since the 1960's, it would nevertheless seem that 'traditional gender differences in the effect of parenthood on work effort persist' (Kaufman and Uhlenberg, 2000: 943). This repertoire also demonstrates the resilience of the gendered social division of labour. Although there is evidence of a shift towards more interchangeable roles, pressures within German society, as well as the socialization process, ensure the ascription to the traditional, socially constructed gendered role of the mother as primary caregiver (Lee and Owens, 2002).

Repertoire: Acceptance - The Male Game

In a narrative account of a female, high-technology business owner Marlow and McAdam (2012a) highlight that women can claim an entrepreneurial role; however, they remain

defined through their gendered categorization (Ahl, 2006). Concurrently, the discourse on the barriers against female entrepreneurs leads to the social reproduction of gender, which represents women as lacking in status and credibility (Bruni et al., 2005). In identifying the 'acceptance of the male game' repertoire, the findings illuminate how the women in the study responded to broader expectations around social norms in relation to the gendered division of labour. On one level, their responses indicate recognition of social expectations about their role and how they purport to challenge it, but on the other they illustrate the occluded nature of gender bias.

RR provides one example of how the women recognise the need to address social expectations. She discussed how her response to this was to cooperate with a male partner to address directly credibility concerns she had faced, and two other women operated businesses with their husbands.

Whilst recognising the need to associate with a male partner to challenge gendered norms, some responses nevertheless reflected the persistence of gendered roles. JJ for example, made reference to decisions making roles, explaining that decisions, such as hiring of personnel or business expansion, rest with her, whereas her husband has the final call on the purchase of computer gadgets.

Other interviewees stated that their male business partners acted as the entrepreneurial role model, facilitating entry into new business engagements, so reinforcing the perception that the entrepreneurial discourse is embedded within and upon masculinity (Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Ahl, 2006). RR indirectly referred to her business partner as an enabler, as without his engagement she most likely would not have established herself as an entrepreneur. Her statement highlighted that the sociocultural status of women influenced the way she set up her business. According to her, working in a male-dominated environment required the involvement of a man, especially for the first client contact. For her, this cooperation was clearly not a matter of competence but of perceived image. The masculine presence

afforded credibility to the venture. He seemed to reflect the norms and expectations most associated with a competent business partner and entrepreneur. RR indirectly stated that she will not enforce change on the gendered role expectation. For her new business, she is looking for another male business partner in order to adhere to the gendered role expectations of her male clients.

"I do not really need him as support...I can do it without him...It is only for the image." (RR: 4.04 2 Ref 4)

RR expressed a gendered picture of entrepreneurship that seemed not much different to waged employment. According to her, the same boundaries that waged employment brings keep re-emerging in entrepreneurship, except that it is easier as an entrepreneur to handle them.

Performing entrepreneurship: between the symbolic spaces of home and work

The study findings indicate that gender and entrepreneurship are performed by shuttling between the two symbolic spaces of home and work (Bruni et al, 2004a). Because the two spaces closely interweave, it is difficult to draw a line between public space and private space, reinforced by the fact that most of the participants run their businesses from home.

Entrepreneurship, as the women's accounts testify, presents as flexible enough to facilitate physical or psychological independence from traditional, masculine, career arrangements (Tams and Arthur, 2010; Sullivan and Arthur, 2006). As a career choice, entrepreneurship is associated with the individual's ability to exercise agency and symbolic of careers as boundariless. Yet, the findings support the perception that critical entrepreneurial attributes are seen as masculine, creating a gendered hierarchy where women are defined as lacking (Marlow and Swail, 2014). Despite Germany's rising employment rates (Festing, Kornau and Schäfer, 2015), the 'rigidity' of the German institutional environment concerning legislation and regulation (Festing, Schäfer and Scullion, 2013: 1873), constrain the women's ability to

exercise a level of agency commensurate with the promises associated with new career theory.

The interviews revealed that the desire for a better work–life balance motivated the participants to start their own business. None of the interviewees had considered dropping out of their job entirely for childcare. Instead, they were trying to find an alternative in entrepreneurship to balance the demands of home and family, a boundary crossing performed mostly by women. They assumed that they could ‘have it all’; however, their described experience was somewhat different. Being a mother, wife and an entrepreneur at the same time created a number of challenges. Many of the women had to find strategies to fit in with prevailing institutional environment, whether this be dealing with limited opening hours of clinics and grocery stores or gendered norms about women’s role in the workplace.

The gendered experiences articulated by the women arose from not only the masculine cultures of various industries (Marlow, 2002) but also in relation to the women’s own expectations regarding their roles as entrepreneurs, women, wives and mothers. The interaction of the various roles generated tensions that they had problems reconciling. They referred not only to the management of the interface between work and home but also to the various roles they need to assume as business managers. The women expressed a struggle in managing the different roles ascribed to them based on their sociocultural status.

As a career the women’s articulation of their entrepreneurship experience has revealed gendered perceptions and experiences of entrepreneurship in Germany. The interpretative repertoires constructed around their entrepreneurial experience are multifaceted, and mainly highlight elements of bias and discrimination attached to them as gendered subjects, rooted in the socio-legal context. The repertoire ‘anti-child, anti-woman’ highlights deeply rooted stances towards maternity and entrepreneurship, such as the adherence to traditional gender roles with respect to childcare; encouraged by a system which is concerned with the preservation of status differentials (Drobnič and Rodríguez, 2011) based on gender.

Acceptance of the masculine characteristics and norms underpinning entrepreneurship representations (Achtenhagen and Welter, 2011) arose from the 'acceptance of the male game' repertoire.

Referring to Germany and its history as conservative welfare state with a coordinated market economy (Hall and Soskice, 2001), the study has contributed to understandings of the construction of gender and the effects of structural constraints on women's careers outside the Anglophone context. Despite Germany's recent attempts to gear social policies from the male breadwinner and female homemaker family towards an adult worker model (Fleckenstein, 2011), the study demonstrates that conservatism also acts as a boundary to shape women's entrepreneurial careers. Historically the employment of women, especially those who are mothers of young children, was strongly discouraged (Fleckenstein, 2010), and reinforced by lean social services and the marriage based joint taxation system constituting serious barriers to female employment. Women therefore face a diverse range of barriers as they move towards entrepreneurship and gender inequality is built into their working lives.

One of the surprising observations was that the women themselves did not perceive discriminatory behaviour as such, as we outline in the 'acceptance-the male game' repertoire. The emerging repertoires and experiences of the women strongly indicate a gendered division of labour, which seems deeply rooted in the historically conservative approach towards working women. This context not only shapes gendered behaviour in organizations but also women's careers as entrepreneurs. Further, the expansion of an employment-oriented family friendly policy, which is considered a core element of the German welfare regime (Fleckenstein, 2010), did not consider the necessary infrastructure to accommodate this change in direction. Child care for children below the age of three years is still a scarce resource and another structural constraint influencing women's career choices. From this background of conservatism, and given there is yet no established German equivalent for the word *gender*, the findings draw attention to the resilience of

gender as a social category that shapes socio-cultural perceptions and attitudes towards women's careers as entrepreneurs.

Conclusion

The findings illustrate the limitations of boundaryless career theory (Inkson et al., 2012) by drawing attention to the significance of institutional constraints upon women who have exercised agency over their career choices. In contrast to the general exclusion of boundaries in boundaryless career theory, this study illustrates the importance of recognizing gender as a boundary to women's careers, and how the boundary of gender takes on a particular form according to the specificities of the socio-legal and economic context. The allure of entrepreneurship as a career that facilitates women's movement between the boundaries of home and work, even within an economy experiencing a talent shortage (Festing, Kornau and Schäfer, 2015), therefore proves misleading in the German context.

As a response to calls for more research on the nature of boundaries (Hernes, 2004; Inkson et al., 2012), processes of career formation (Inkson et al., 2012) and women's entrepreneurship experiences, the paper contributes to new career theory by drawing attention to the culturally bounded nature of our discursive choices (Edley, 2001). It highlights the limits of the notion of boundarylessness by favouring a view of career that takes account of the ways in which boundaries are constructed. The distinctive nature of Germany's institutional context, including its status as a coordinated market economy (Hall and Soskice, 2001), within which the women's entrepreneurial careers were formed, draws attention to the limits placed on these women when attempting to exercise agency over their career choices. Boundaryless career theory, with its conceptual roots in the US liberal market economy (Hall and Soskice, 2001) by contrast, assumes individual careers are performed in a de-regulated institutional environment where the only constraints are the limits of individual aspirations and motivations.

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